DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 041 517 FL 001 857

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TITLE Motivating the FL Student.
PUB DATE 9 May 70
NOTE 3p.; Speech given at the New England Foreign Language Association Conference at Fairfield University, Connecticut, May 9, 1970

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.25
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Communication, Educational Improvement, Instructional Program Divisions, *Language Instruction, Methodology, *Modern Languages, Motivation, Nonverbal Communication, Program Effectiveness, Relevance (Education), *Student Attitudes, Student Interests, *Student Motivation, Student Needs, Teacher Attitudes, *Teacher Motivation

ABSTRACT

The rapidly changing language instruction picture prompts the author to discuss the concept of teacher and student motivation. The disappearing foreign language requirement, the notion of relevance, and high attrition rates are related to the current crisis. Suggestions to develop greater motivation, aimed principally at improving communication, conclude the article. (RL)

ED041517

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NEFLA Conference
Fairfield University
May 9, 1970

MOTIVATING THE FL STUDENT

After almost total neglect for many years, the theory of motivation of language students has suddenly been raised to a high level of importance. The reasons behind this aroused interest are fairly simple:

* The language requirement for college graduation is on the way out.

* Students today---people today---demand faster results and more relevance.

* We have tried just about every other possible theory of how to teach language and must still often confess to ridiculously high attrition between first year (50% at the end of Level I) and the advanced courses (90% by the end of Level II).

As a result, one can now read an increasing number of articles and chapters, or occasionally entire books, by psychologists and psycholinguists and other experts on motivating the "new" foreign language student, as the Northeast Conference phrased it. These are welcome and valuable. Refreshingly, they do not all express the same point of view. Many ideas are being put forth, and all are worthy of consideration. If the average classroom teacher reads between the lines, he will conclude, correctly, that there is no single way to do things, no one sacred or magic way to teach.

Just as the student today is reaching for more freedom, so can the teacher. He can take the best from what he learns and apply it. But first, he must know himself and he must know his students. Furthermore, he must truly like them and not fear them. The teacher today MUST communicate, find out why those students are there in his classes, inform himself of their goals, reconcile these with his own and with the goals of the profession in general, know if individuals in each class have special talents or paralyzing inhibitions, and then get down to the business of teaching, of helping them to achieve the success that everyone wants for them.

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There is no doubt that any thoughtful teacher will find his own way. The following suggestions may help. They are offered in a spirit of sharing, not as oracular guidelines. They've worked in some classes; perhaps they'll work in others.

1) Love thy students as thy language. Teaching is not running off dittos. Students are not carbon copies of the teacher. If language is to become their tool, their personal enrichment, one can expect, even hope, that they will "do their own thing" with it. Therefore, encourage creativity and individualism. Offer multiple opportunities for extra-credit. Never stifle initiative. Mold it, build on it---whatever students want to do in connection with the foreign language or culture, it can probably be worked into the program, without loss of control or the sacrifice of important objectives. Even more specifically, suggest projects that they can carry out in their own way: artistic, theatrical, secretarial, technical, musical, academic, culinary.

2) Let students in on what's going on. Orientation does NOT come but once a year. Communicate frequently and freely about the purposes behind classroom activities. Allow feedback and profit from it to make realistic adjustments. One helpful device is the preparation and distribution of an assignment sheet, covering a period of several weeks. Most students like such scheduling from time to time, as long as it is not too tight, since it allows them to plan ahead. Use of a reasonable assignment sheet practically eliminates the problem of homework not being done.

3) Another helpful approach is to ditto off a list of your own suggestions for "how to succeed" in the studying of a language, perhaps especially in this particular class, this particular year---that is, referring to use of specific texts, new or increased emphases, good home study techniques, and ways to benefit most from the classwork. Don't approach this, however, from the negative point of view, by setting down a long list of "REGULATIONS!" Take the positive standpoint. These are helpful hints that are being offered, so that students will do better, learn more and find more satisfaction in the study of a foreign language.

4) Be very flexible and very conscious of class atmosphere and teacher-student rapport (which is not constant, by the way; even once established, it has to be worked at!). Being alert, aware and sensitive is not being weak; it is

being smart. It is knowing how to play the game. Because teaching, like life, is often a game in a realistic, not unrealistic, sense. It involves good timing, teamwork, skill and the right move at the right time. On the part of the teacher, it requires an alert but relaxed attitude, calm control, patience, dedication, determination, vision---in essence, all the qualities that go to make up any leader in any profession.

In conclusion, believe in yourself, and believe in your students. You'll soon find that your students believe in you too, and that they will begin to believe in their own ability to learn a language. At this point, most will be motivated to prove it.